TWO UNPUBLISHED ESSAYS

RALPH WALDO EMERSON

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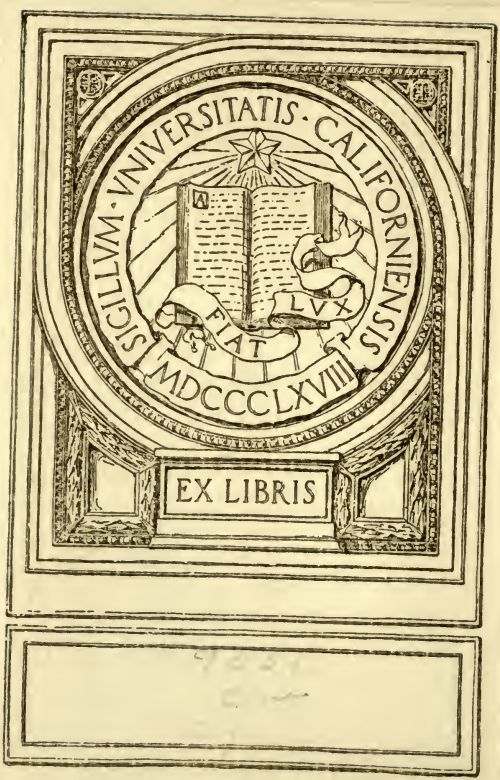
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TWO · UNPUBLISHED · ESSAYS

THE · CHARACTER · OF SOCRATES

THE · PRESENT · STATE OF ETHICAL PHILOSOPHY

BY

RALPH · WALDO · EMERSON

WITH · AN · INTRODUCTION · BY

EDWARD · EVERETT · HALE

M · D · CCC · XC · VI

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Introduction

THE name of James Bowdoin is first on that catalogue preserved by John Lovell of pupils of the Boston Latin School, which is the basis of its printed catalogue. He graduated at Cambridge in 1745, and, in 1783, the college made him a Doctor of Laws. He was a fellow of the college, president of the American Academy, and Governor of Massachusetts in 1788. He was a leading member of the convention which adopted the Federal Constitution; he was president of the convention of 1780, which made the Constitution of Massachusetts. Very likely it was he who gave Harvard College its new name of "the University at Cambridge," and it is perhaps a pity that that name has not been preserved by his successors.

When he died, in 1790, he left in his will a bequest, "to my Alma Mater, the University at Cambridge," of some four hundred pounds, to be placed at interest in good security, "and the interest thereof annually applied in the way of premiums for the advancement of useful and polite literature in the residents, as well graduates as undergraduates, of the university, the premiums to be paid in such way and manner as shall be best adapted to excite a spirit of emulation among such residents; the performances entitled to such premiums to be

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read in public by their respective authors, who shall deliver a fair copy of the same, to be lodged in the library, such copies to be written on quarto paper of the same size, that such of them as shall merit it may be bound together in handsome volumes and lodged in the library."

At some period not very long after Governor Bowdoin's death, the arrangements were made, substantially as they are still carried on, for the Bowdoin prize dissertations, as they are called at Cambridge. An announcement is made annually that dissertations will be received, from resident graduates and from undergraduates, in competition for the prizes offered. Several subjects are assigned, from which the competitors may select such as they prefer to handle; but no competitor may write on any subject except one of these. The income of the fund has not been all used in every year for the prizes offered, and it has thus been enlarged by the appropriation of unused interest to the increase of the principal, till it stands on the treasurer's account at about fourteen thousand dollars. At the time of Bowdoin's death, the pound of which he spoke was worth $3.33; the fund is therefore now nearly ten times what it was then.

At present, nine prizes are offered from this foundation. They may be as much as one hundred dollars; they will not be less than fifty dollars. They are offered for translations into Greek or Latin, for compositions in

Greek or Latin, and for English essays. Some of the subjects in English essays are historical, some are what is now called philosophical, and some are scientific. The dissertations must not contain more than ten thousand words, and the authors of successful dissertations are invited to read them in public, at a place and time to be designated by the dean.

In Mr. Emerson's day, the arrangement was substantially the same, but the first prizes were then only fifty dollars, and the second prizes thirty. The tradition is that a gold medal was originally offered, and it was offered at that time; but for many, many years no candidate ever asked for the medal. The winners of prizes were generally young men who knew how to use their money; and when, many years after Mr. Emerson, a successful competitor asked for his gold medal, it proved that the college had no die for any such medal, and no such offer has since been made.

Fortunately for us, among the subjects given in the year 1820 was "The Character of Socrates." Mr. Emerson was at this time seventeen years old. Knowing him as we know him now, one is not surprised that he chose this subject. His dissertation, printed from the copy preserved in the college library, is in the reader's hands. The next year, fortunately again, there was among the subjects "The Present State of Ethical Philosophy." Once more Mr. Emerson was

successful in the competition, and the second of these curious and valuable papers exists, therefore, in the collection at Cambridge, which also is reprinted here.

Whoever reads these essays now, if he be at all familiar with the habit of writing, in the first half of the century, of men who were dealing with such subjects, will see that the boy of seventeen or eighteen years of age wrote what must have surprised and sometimes annoyed the sort of men who would be apt to be named upon a committee of award. In the present instance, the committees were the corporation of the college, consisting of President Kirkland, John Davis, Dr. William Ellery Channing, John Lowell, John Phillips, William Prescott, and Dr. Eliphalet Porter. Governor Gore assisted in the award of 1820. It would be hard to make a better committee.

It will be an encouragement to many a young man, in his early tussles of competition, if he be reminded that Ralph Waldo Emerson at that time could not, or did not, write an essay that was thought worthy of a first prize. It is pathetic to think that the judges were not willing to award the first prize to any of the papers which were offered in the competition.

But to us who read after the event, who read after Mr. Emerson has changed the whole philosophy of that time, the opportunity to read what the "Yankee Plato" said, when he was a boy, of the life of Socrates is most

fortunate. I cannot but think that, if we had not his name, if this manuscript had struggled through anonymously and were printed to-day, we should have sense enough, wit enough, and insight enough to recognize the author.

The reader will be curious to compare the paper with the sketch of the life of Socrates in the essay on Plato in "Representative Men." The date of the publication of the essay is 1876, but, probably, much of it had been put on paper before that time.

In reading the two papers, I have been led to ask myself whether the careful study which, for the preparation of the first, he gave to the life of Socrates, did not do something in the direction of the studies of his junior and senior years, and so if it did not lead up to the second paper. But such speculations are hardly more than fanciful. It is he who said, when he was not yet thirty years old, "Milton does not love moral perfection more than I. That which I cannot yet declare has been my angel from childhood until now." Why should we not expect of the boy who was fast growing into such a manhood, that he should write, if he could, on the position of the study of ethical philosophy in his time?

The condition of ethical philosophy in 1821 was certainly not very promising. In 1837, in the same college, I had given to me for my study Paley's "Moral Philosophy," in which I was taught that I did right in

the hope and expectation of being paid in heaven for my sacrifice. Things were no better sixteen years before.

It would be idle to anticipate the pleasure with which the reader will follow these early essays, by pointing out some striking passages in which the early promise of the man may be observed. It is a pity that we have no contemporary record of the occasion in which he read these essays before an audience of undergraduates. The will required that the essays should be so read. At the present time, they are read "when and where the dean requests." At times, there has been a certain difficulty, I believe, in finding an audience. But had there been any spirit of prophecy in the classes which graduated in 1820 and 1821, there would have been no doubt but that they would have filled the modest chapel of the time to hear Ralph Waldo Emerson lecture on Socrates or on ethical philosophy.

EDWARD E. HALE.

NOTE. — Since this introduction was in type, Mr. Josiah P. Quincy has shown to me the original gold medal which his father received as a first prize when Mr. Emerson took a second. The medal bears the head of Bowdoin on the obverse. This shows that the die has been lost in recent times, if the traditions above referred to were well founded.

The Character of Socrates

The Character of Socrates

[A Bowdoin Prize Dissertation of 1820]

"Guide my way
Through fair Lyceum's walk, the green retreats
Of Academus, and the thymy vale
Where, oft enchanted with Socratic sounds,
Ilissus pure devolved his tuneful stream
In gentler murmurs. From the blooming store
Of these auspicious fields, may I unblamed
Transplant some living blossoms to adorn
My native clime."

THE philosophy of the human mind has of late years commanded an unusual degree of attention from the curious and the learned. The increasing notice which it obtains is owing much to the genius of those men who have raised themselves with the science to general regard, but chiefly, as its patrons contend, to the uncontrolled progress of human improvement. The zeal of its advocates, however, in other respects commendable, has sinned in one particular,—they have laid a little too much self-complacent stress

on the merit and success of their own unselfish exertions, and in their first contempt of the absurd and trifling speculations of former metaphysicians, appear to have confounded sophists and true philosophers, and to have been disdainful of some who have enlightened the world and marked out a path for future advancement.

Indeed, the giant strength of modern improvement is more indebted to the early wisdom of Thales and Socrates and Plato than is generally allowed, or perhaps than modern philosophers have been well aware.

This supposition is strongly confirmed by a consideration of the character of Socrates, which, in every view, is uncommon and admirable. To one who should read his life as recorded by Xenophon and Plato without previous knowledge of the man, the extraordinary character and circumstances of his biography would appear incredible. It would seem that antiquity had endeavored to fable forth a being clothed with all the perfection which the purest and brightest imagination could conceive or combine, bestow-

ing upon the piece only so much of mortality as to make it tangible and imitable. Even in this imaginary view of the character, we have been inclined to wonder that men, without a revelation, by the light of reason only, should set forth a model of moral perfection which the wise of any age would do well to imitate. And, further, it might offer a subject of ingenious speculation, to mark the points of difference, should modern fancy, with all its superiority of philosophic and theological knowledge, endeavor to create a similar paragon. But this is foreign to our purpose.

It will be well, in reviewing the character of Socrates, to mark the age in which he lived, as the moral and political circumstances of the times would probably exert an important and immediate influence on his opinions and character. The dark ages of Greece, from the settlement of the colonies to the Trojan War, had long closed. The young republics had been growing in strength, population, and territory, digesting their constitutions and building up their name and importance. The Persian War, that hard but

memorable controversy of rage and spite, conflicting with energetic and disciplined independence, had shed over their land an effulgence of glory which richly deserved all that applause which after ages have bestowed. It was a stern trial of human effort, and the Greeks might be pardoned if, in their intercourse with less glorious nations, they carried the record of their long triumph too far to conciliate national jealousies. The aggrandizement of Greece which followed this memorable war was the zenith of its powers and splendor, and ushered in the decay and fall of the political fabric.

The age of Pericles has caused Athens to be remembered in history. At no time during her existence were the arts so flourishing, popular taste and feeling so exalted and refined, or her political relations so extensive and respected. The Athenian people were happy at home, reverenced abroad, — and at the head of the Grecian confederacy. Their commerce was lucrative, and their wars few and honorable. In this mild period it was to be expected that literature and

science would grow up vigorously under the fostering patronage of taste and power. The Olympian games awakened the emulation of genius and produced the dramatic efforts of Æschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes, and philosophy came down from heaven to Anaxagoras, Archelaus, and Socrates.

Such was the external and obvious condition of Athens, — apparently prosperous, but a concealed evil began to display specific and disastrous consequences. The sophists had acquired the brightest popularity and influence, by the exhibition of those superficial accomplishments whose novelty captivated the minds of an ingenious people, among whom true learning was yet in its infancy. Learning was not yet loved for its own sake. It was prized as a saleable commodity. The sophists bargained their literature, such as it was, for a price; and this price, ever exorbitant, was yet regulated by the ability of the scholar.

That this singular order of men should possess so strong an influence over the Athenian

public argues no strange or unnatural state of society, as has been sometimes represented; it is the proper and natural result of improvement in a money-making community. By the prosperity of their trading interests all the common wants of society were satisfied, and it was natural that the mind should next urge its claim to cultivation, and the surplus of property be expended for the gratification of the intellect. This has been found true in the growth of all nations, — that after successful trade, literature soon throve well, — provided the human mind was cramped by no disadvantages of climate or "skyey influences."

The Athenian sophists adapted their course of pursuits of knowledge, with admirable skill, to the taste of the people. They first approved themselves masters of athletic exercises, for the want of which no superiority of intellect, however consummate, would compensate in the Grecian republics. They then applied themselves to the cultivation of forensic eloquence, which enabled them to discourse volubly, if ignorantly, on any subject and on any occasion, however unexpected.

To become perfect in this grand art, it was necessary to acquire, by habit and diligence, an imperturbable self-possession which could confront, unabashed, the rudest accident; and moreover, a flood of respondent and exclamatory phrases, skilfully constructed to meet the emergencies of a difficult conversation. After this laudable education had thus far accomplished its aim, the young sophist became partially conversant with the limited learning of the age in all its subjects. The poets, the historians, the sages, the writers on the useful arts, each and all occupied by turns his glancing observation. And when the motley composition of his mind was full, it only remained to stamp upon his character some few peculiarities, — to make him what the moderns have called a "mannerist," — and his professional education was considered complete.

When the sophists made themselves known, they assumed a sanctity of manners, which awed familiarity and very conveniently cloaked their sinister designs. Pythagoras, after his persevering exertions for the attainment of knowledge,

after his varied and laborious travels, had established a romantic school at Crotona with institutions resembling free masonry, which had planted in Greece prepossessions favorable to philosophy.

The sophists availed themselves of their prejudices, and amused the crowds who gathered at the rumor of novelty, with riddles and definitions, with gorgeous theories of existence,—splendid fables and presumptuous professions. They laid claim to all knowledge, and craftily continued to steal the respect of a credulous populace, and to enrich themselves by pretending to instruct the children of the opulent. When they had thus fatally secured their own emolument, they rapidly threw off the assumed rigidity of their morals, and, under covert of a sort of *perfumed* morality, indulged themselves and their followers in abominable excesses, degrading the mind and debauching virtue. Unhappily for Greece, the contaminating vices of Asiatic luxury, the sumptuous heritage of Persian War, had but too naturally seconded the growing depravity.

The youth of great men is seldom marked by any peculiarities which arrest observation. Their minds have secret workings; and, though they feel and enjoy the consciousness of genius, they seldom betray prognostics of greatness. Many who were cradled by misfortune and want have reproached the sun as he rose and went down, for amidst the baseness of circumstances their large minds were unsatisfied, unfed; many have bowed lowly to those whose names their own were destined to outlive; many have gone down to their graves in obscurity, for fortune withheld them from eminence, and to beg they were ashamed.

Of the son of the sculptor and midwife we only know that he became eminent as a sculptor, but displaying genius for higher pursuits, Crito, who afterward became his disciple, procured for him admission to the schools and to such education as the times furnished. But the rudiments of his character and his homely virtues were formed in the workshop, secluded from temptation; and those inward operations of his strong

mind were begun which were afterwards matured in the ripeness of life.

We shall proceed to examine the character of the philosopher, after premising that we do not intend to give the detail of his life, but shall occasionally adduce facts of biography as illustrative of the opinions we have formed. With regard to the method pursued in the arrangement of our remarks, we must observe that sketches of the character of an individual can admit of little definiteness of plan, but we shall direct our attention to a consideration of the leading features of his mind, and to a few of his moral excellences which went to make up the great aggregate of his character.

The chief advantage which he owed to nature, the source of his philosophy and the foundation of his character, was a large share of plain good sense, — a shrewdness which would not suffer itself to be duped, and withal, concealed under a semblance of the frankest simplicity, which beguiled the objects of his pursuit into conversation and confidence which met his wishes. This

was the faculty which enabled him to investigate his own character, to learn the natural tendency and bias of his own genius, and thus to perfectly control his mental energies.

There is a story of Socrates, related by Cicero, which militates somewhat with the opinion we have formed of his mind, — that when a physiognomist, after having examined his features, had pronounced him a man of bad passions and depraved character, Socrates reproved the indignation of his disciples by acknowledging the truth of the assertion so far as nature was concerned, saying that it had been the object of his life to eradicate these violent passions. This might have been merely a trick of art, and as such is consistent with his character. We cannot view it in any other light; for although it is very probable that natural malignity might have darkened his early life, yet no assertion of his own would convince us, in contradiction with his whole life and instruction, that he was ever subject to the fiercer passions. Such, too, was the order of his intellect. He was a man of

strong and vivid conceptions, but utterly destitute of fancy. Still, he possessed originality and sometimes sublimity of thought. His powerful mind had surmounted the unavoidable errors of education, and had retained those acquirements which are found applicable to the uses of common life, whilst he had discarded whatever was absurd or unprofitable.

He studied the nature and explored the destinies of men with a chastised enthusiasm. Notwithstanding the sober, dispassionate turn of mind which we have mentioned, he is not unmoved at all times; when he enters into the discussion upon the immortality of the soul and the nature and attributes of Deity, he forgets his quibbles upon terms, and his celebrated irony, and sensibly warms and expands with his theme. This was aided by the constant activity of his mind, which endowed him with energy of thought and language, and its discipline never suffered him to obtrude an unguarded emotion.

In perfect accordance with this view of his mind is his conduct under circumstances related

by Plato. In prison, whilst under condemnation, he was directed in vision to seek the favor of the Muses. This new discipline enjoined upon him was utterly incongruous with the temper and habits of feeling usual to the philosopher. His plain sense and logical mind, which would reduce everything, however impressive, to mathematical measurement, were little conversant, we may suppose, with poetical visions. In fact, we could not suppose a character more diametrically opposite to the soul of the poet, in all the gradations of cultivated mind, than the soul of Socrates.

The food and occupation of the former has to do with golden dreams, — airy nothings, bright personifications of glory and joy and evil, — and we imagine him sitting apart, like Brahma, moulding magnificent forms, clothing them with beauty and grandeur. The latter dwells on earth, dealing plainly and bluntly with men and men's actions, instructing them what to do and to forbear; and even when he desires to lift his tone, it is only to mingle with higher reality, but never forsaking safe, but tedious, paths of certainty.

All this we know, and the manner which Socrates selected to perform the task assigned him creates neither disappointment nor surprise; for perhaps in the biographical annals of his country there was no intellect whose leading feature more nearly resembled his own than Æsop, whose fables he undertook to versify.

It may well be supposed that a mind thus cast was eminently calculated to instruct, and his didactic disposition always rendered him rather the teacher than the companion of his friends. Add to all this an unrivalled keenness of penetration into the character of others, and hence arose his ruling motive in all his intercourse with men; it was not to impart literary knowledge or information in science or art, but to lay open to his own view the human mind, and all its unacknowledged propensities, its weak and fortified positions, and the springs of human action. All this was achieved by the power of his art, and it enabled him easily to grasp the mind, and mould it at will, and to unite and direct the wandering energies of the human soul.

His mind was cultivated, though his learning was little. He was acquainted with the works of the most eminent poets of his country, but as he seems never to have made literature his study, the limited erudition he possessed was probably gleaned from the declamations of the sophists, whose pride never scrupled to borrow abundantly from the superfluous light which departed genius afforded. His own acquisitions had been made in the workshops of the Athenian artisans, in the society of Aspasia and Theombrota, and by intelligent, experienced observation.

Though living in Athens, he acquired little taste for the elegance or pride of life; surrounded as he was by the living marbles which all succeeding ages have consented to admire, and then just breathing from the hand of the artist, he appeared utterly dead to their beauties, and used them only as casual illustrations of an argument. In the gratification of his desire to learn and know mankind, he visited the poor and the rich, the virtuous and the degraded, and set himself to explore all the varieties of circumstances

occurring in a great city, that he might discover what were "the elements which furnish forth creation."

We may judge from the acquaintances of the philosopher what were the minds most congenial to his own. Of his great contemporaries,— Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, — Euripides alone was his pupil and friend. He never attended the theatre only as his tragedies were to be performed. This warmth of feeling for the chaste and tender dramatist should defend his mind from the imputation of utter deafness to taste and beauty. The majestic and sublime genius of Sophocles was not so intimately allied to the every-day morals of Socrates; Euripides knew and taught more human nature in its common aspects. The oracle of Delphos justified his choice in that remarkable declaration: *Σοφός Σοφοκλῆς, σοφώτερος Εὐριπιδῆς, ἀνδρώντε παντῶν, Σωκράτης σοφώτατος.*

The fathers, with their usual grudge against the heathen oracles, formed singular opinions respecting this extraordinary decree. "The

great Origen is of the opinion that the Devil, when he delivered that sentence, by giving Socrates those partners purposely obscured his glory, whilst he was in some measure forced to applaud it."

We have attempted to draw the outline of one of the most remarkable minds which human history has recorded, and which was rendered extraordinary by its wonderful adaptation to the times in which he lived. We must now hasten to our great task of developing the moral superiority of the philosopher.

A manly philosophy has named fortitude, temperance, and prudence its prime virtues. All belonged, in a high degree of perfection, to the son of Sophroniscus, but fortitude more particularly. Perhaps it was not a natural virtue, but the first-fruits of his philosophy. A mind whose constitution was built up like his — the will of the philosopher moulding the roughest materials into form and order — might create its own virtues, and set them in array to compose the aggregate of character. He was not like other

men, the sport of circumstances, but by the persevering habits of forbearance and self-denial he had acquired that control over his whole being which enabled him to hold the same even, unchangeable temperament in all the extremes of his fortunes. This exemption from the influences of circumstances in the moral world is almost like exemption from the law of gravitation in the natural economy. The exemplifications of this fortitude are familiar. When all the judges of the senate, betraying an unworthy pusillanimity, gave way to an iniquitous demand of the populace, Socrates alone disdained to sacrifice justice to the fear of the people.

On another occasion, in the forefront of a broken battle, Alcibiades owed his life to the firmness of his master. Patriotic steadfastness in resistance to the oppression of the Thirty Tyrants is recorded to his honor. Although we are unwilling to multiply these familiar instances, we would not be supposed to undervalue that milder fortitude which Diogenes Laertius has lauded, and which clouded his domestic joys. The vic-

tory over human habits and passions which shall bring them into such subjection as to be subservient to the real advantage of the possessor is that necessary virtue which philosophers denominate temperance. We are led to speak of this particularly because its existence in the character of Socrates has been questioned.

The impurity of public morals and the prevalence of a debasing vice has left a festering reproach on the name of Athens, which deepens as the manners of civilized nations have altered and improved. Certain equivocal expressions and paragraphs in the Dialogues of Plato have formerly led many to fasten the stigma on Socrates. This abomination has likewise been laid to the charge of Virgil, and probably with as little justice. Socrates taught that every soul was an eternal, immutable form of beauty in the divine mind, and that the most beautiful mortals approached nearest to that celestial mould; that it was the honor and delight of human intellect to contemplate this *beau ideal*, and that this was better done through the medium of earthly per-

fection. For this reason this sober enthusiast associated with such companions as Alcibiades, Critias, and other beautiful Athenians.

A late article in the *Quarterly Review*, the better to vindicate the character of Aristophanes from the reproach attached to him as the author of "The Clouds," has taken some pains to attack the unfortunate butt of the comedian's buffoonery. It is unpleasant at this day to find facts misrepresented in order to conform to a system, and unwarranted insinuations wantonly thrown out to vilify the most pure philosopher of antiquity, for no other purpose than to add the interest of novelty to a transient publication. It is a strong, and one would think an unanswerable, argument against the allegation, that his unsparing calumniator, the bitter Aristophanes, should have utterly omitted this grand reproach, while he wearies his sarcasm on more insignificant follies. Nor did he pass it by because it was not accounted a crime, as if the fashion of the age justifies the enormity; for in this identical play he introduces his Just Orator,

declaiming against this vice in particular and remembering with regret the better manners of better times, when lascivious gestures were unstudied and avoided and the cultivated strength of manhood was devoted to austere, laborious virtue. The whole character and public instructions of Socrates ought to have shielded him from this imputation, while they manifest its utter improbability. When the malignity of an early historian had given birth to the suspicion, the fathers, who often bore no good-will to Socrates (whose acquired greatness eclipsed their natural parts), often employed their pens to confirm and diffuse it, and it owes its old currency chiefly to their exertions.

We shall not speak particularly of the prudence of Socrates. He possessed it abundantly, in the philosophical signification of the term, — but none of that timorous caution which might interfere with the impulses of patriotism, duty, or courage.

It seems to have been a grand aim of his life to become a patriot, — a reformer of the abuses

of morals and virtue which had become a national calamity. He saw his country embarrassed, and plunging without help in the abyss of moral degradation. Dissipation and excess made Athens their home and revelled with impunity. "Give us a song of Anacreon or Alcæus!" was the common cry. A frightful voluptuousness had entwined itself about the devoted city, and its ultimate baneful consequences had begun their work. In these circumstances, when all eyes appeared to be blinded to the jeopardy by the fatal incantations of vagrant vine-clad Muses, this high-toned moralist saw the havoc that was in operation. He desired to restore his countrymen; he would not treacherously descend to flatter them.

To accomplish this, he selected a different course from the ordinary plans of young men. To an Athenian entering on life and aspiring after eminence, the inducements to virtue were weak and few, but to vice numberless and strong. Popularity was to be acquired among these degenerate republicans; not as formerly among

their great ancestors, by toilsome struggles for pre-eminence in purity, by discipline and austere virtue, but by squandered wealth, profligacy, and flattery of the corrupt populace. What, then, had an obscure young man, poor and friendless, to expect, sternly binding himself to virtue, and attacking the prevalent vices and prejudices of a great nation? This was certainly no unworthy prototype of the circumstances of the founders of the Christian religion. He devoted himself entirely to the instruction of the young, astonishing them with a strange system of doctrines which inculcated the love of poverty, the forgiveness of injuries, with other virtues equally unknown and unpractised.

His philosophy was a source of good sense and of sublime and practical morality. He directs his disciples to know and practise the purest principles of virtue; to be upright, benevolent, and brave; to shun vice, — *τό θηρίον*, — the dreadful monster which was roaring through earth for his prey. The motives which he presented for their encouragement were as pure as

the life they recommended. Such inducements were held up as advancement in the gradations of moral and intellectual perfection, — the proud delight of becoming more acceptable in the eye of Divinity, and the promise to virtue of communications from other and higher spheres of existence. The notions of the nature of God which Socrates entertained were infinitely more correct and adequate than those of any other philosopher before him whose opinions have come down to us.

Additional praise is due to him, since he alone dared to express his sentiments on the subject and his infidelity to the popular religion. "What is God?" said the disciples to Plato. "It is hard," answered the philosopher, "to know, and impossible to divulge." Here is that reluctance which timorous believers were obliged to display. "What is God?" said they to Socrates, and he replied, "The great God himself, who has formed the universe and sustains the stupendous work whose every part is finished with the utmost goodness and harmony; he who preserves

them perfect in immortal vigor and causes them to obey him with unfailing punctuality and a rapidity not to be followed by the imagination — this God makes himself sufficiently visible by the endless wonders of which he is the author, but continues always invisible in himself." This is explicit and noble. He continues, "Let us not, then, refuse to believe even what we do not behold, and let us supply the defect of our corporeal eyes by using those of the soul; but especially let us learn to render the just homage of respect and veneration to that Divinity whose will it seems to be that we should have no other perception of him but by his effects in our favor. Now this adoration, this homage, consists in pleasing him, and we can only please him by doing his will."

These are the exalted sentiments and motives which Socrates enforced upon men, not in insulated or extraordinary portions of his system but through the whole compass of his instructions. Convinced that the soul is endowed with energies and powers, by which, if well directed, she strives

and climbs continually towards perfection, it was his object to stimulate and guide her; to quicken her aspirations with new motives, to discover and apply whatever might spur on conscientious endeavor or back its efforts with omnipotent strength. He wished the care and improvement of the soul to be of chief concern, that of the body comparatively trifling. The natural effect of his philosophy was to form an accomplished pagan, — so perfect a man as was compatible with the state of society; and this state should not be underrated. A nation of disciples of Socrates would suppose a state of human advancement which modern ambition and zeal, with all its superiority of knowledge and religion, might never hope to attain. And, could Athens have expelled her sophists and corruptors, and by exhibiting respect for his instructions have extended the influence of her most mighty mind until the chastity of her manners was restored and the infirmities of her dotage displaced by active virtues, — had her citizens then become the converts and advocates of Socratic sentiments, — she might

have flourished and triumphed on till this day, a free and admirable commonwealth of philosophers, and looked with enviable unconcern on all the revolutions about her that have agitated and swallowed up nations; and Philip of Macedon and Mummius of Rome might have slept in obscurity. But this is digression, and we can offer no apology except the pleasure which such a vision affords. We must now proceed to say something of his ambiguous genius.

The δαίμων of Socrates partakes so much of the marvellous that there is no cause for wonder arising from the difference of opinion manifested in its discussion. Those who love to ascribe the most to inspiration in the prophets of God's revealed religion claim this mysterious personage as akin to the ministering spirits of the Hebrew faith. Those who, with Xenophon, know not of this similarity, or who do not find foundation for this belief, look upon the δαίμων only as a personification of natural sagacity; some have charitably supposed that the philosopher himself was deluded into a false conviction

that he enjoyed a peculiar communication with the gods by the intervention of a supernatural being,—learned their will and accomplished their ends. These supposed claims which Socrates laid to divine inspiration have induced many to carry their veneration to a more marvellous extent than we can safely follow.

We are willing to allow that they have plausible arguments who have considered the philosopher in the more imposing view, as an especial light of the world commissioned from heaven and as a distant forerunner of the Saviour himself. Dr. Priestley, with a bolder hand, has instituted a comparison between Socrates and the Saviour himself. We are not disposed to enter upon these discussions, as they do not lead to truth and serve only to bewilder. It is probable that the philosopher adopted the successful artifice of Lycurgus, referring his instructions to higher agents in order to enforce their obedience. With regard to the innocence of the artifice, although perhaps no philosopher has a sincerer reverence for truth, yet the doctrine

was but too common at that time that they were free to promulgate useful falsehoods; and if he imagined that the necessity of the case might acquit Lycurgus, certainly a falsehood of a more heinous nature would at present have been justifiable.

The death of this illustrious man has chiefly entitled him to the veneration of mankind. The mild magnanimity which could forgive and justify its unjust oppressors; the benevolence which forgot self and its pains and necessities in the ardor of instructing others; the grandeur of soul which disdained self-preservation purchased at the expense of inflexible principle; the courage which stooped not in extremity — these are virtues which the human understanding always must approve, and which compel admiration. We have heard much of triumphant and honorable deaths at the stake — or by sudden violence, or from natural causes — of men who have died in martyrdom for liberty, religion, or love; these are glorious indeed and excellent. But without taking into consideration the allowance to be

made for exaggeration and the love of the marvellous, we should attribute much to the influence of despair. An enthusiast is hurried suddenly from family and friendship and all the atmosphere of social life — his joys and hopes and habits — to the place of torture and execution, to pay the penalty of adherence to a tenet. The quick and fearful change of circumstances bewilders and overwhelms a mind easily affected by things external. Morbid sensibility takes the place of sanity of mind, and, but partially conscious of his conduct, he mechanically repeats the language strongly written on his memory; and it follows that the ignorant mistake his imbecility for fearlessness, and his insensibility for blissful anticipation of approaching glory. Such cases are by no means improbable, and a strict scrutiny of miraculous last words and dying speeches will find them. But in the sacrifice of Socrates there is no shadow of a doubt on which incredulity might attach itself. The firmness and unconcern with which he regards the approach of death are truly astonishing; there does not appear to

have been the slightest accession of excitement, not the alteration of a degree in his mental temperature. He met his agitated friends with the usual calm discourse and deliberate reasoning. He spoke upon the subject, it is true, when they frequently introduced it, but willingly acquiesced in the ordinations of superior intelligence, and employed his reason to unveil the sublime purposes of Providence.

A fortunate superstition of the Athenians furnished him with the opportunity of manifesting the sincerity and greatness of his philosophy, as the length of time between his condemnation and death enabled him to hold frequent intercourse with his disciples. Human sincerity has seldom passed a severer ordeal than did the principles of Socrates. Notwithstanding the minute accuracy with which his every action has been detailed, we know not that the fortitude of which we have spoken ever abandoned him to a moment's melancholy. We behold him upbraiding the pusillanimity, or soothing the sorrows, of those friends whose office it should have been,

in the ordinary course of circumstances, to alleviate his own dying agonies. The dignity and grandeur of soul, everywhere predominant, is sustained to the conclusion of the great tragedy, till we are irresistibly led to bestow upon the pagan the praise of a perfect man.

It is melancholy to turn from this heroic event, this mighty giving-up of the ghost, to the dark history of the causes and agents of so foul a murder. We should avoid all recurrence to it, and save mankind the shock and blush of recollection, did not we think that some palliation might be pleaded to soften this black disgrace on a name we so much love to venerate as that of Athens.

When the philosopher began life there was a freshness of glory diffused over his country which no after times equalled. There had been magnificent success in arms and arts, and achievements which overshadowed the great names of their own romance, — Hercules and Theseus and Achilles. These stupendous successes, to which modern history does not pre-

tend to offer a parallel, had become familiar to them, and led them to that independence of character the ultimate effect of which was that caprice which distinguished the people of Athens.

It was natural, further beholding the full display of their might, which had been thus gloriously exhibited, that these republicans should acquire confidence in themselves, a fearlessness of contending interests about them, and of the consequences of their own actions, which was imparted from the political community as a whole to each separate state, and from the state to each individual. Such countrymen had the youthful Socrates. But he lived to see them degenerate, and crouch to the despotism of the Thirty; to submit to defeat abroad, and to faction at home. All this, however, had little effect on that caprice whose cause we have mentioned. When the anarchy of the Thirty Tyrants was over, the impatience with which the people remembered their own submission only increased the action of their caprice; nor is it extraordinary if an overflowing zeal to approve

themselves freemen should have made judgment hasty.

We should rejoice if the death of Socrates were referable merely to this impetuous spirit of liberty; but it belongs chiefly to that general debasement of morals which it was the passion of Socrates to attack and reprehend. Their progress is sufficiently marked by the successive characters of the comedy, from its primal innocence to its third stage, when that grossness became fashionable which stains the dramas of Aristophanes.

But not only their anger at the man who reproached them with their vices induced them to offer violence to him, but likewise his infidelity to the religion of their fathers, and introduction of new doctrines. Grosser infidelity than that for which Socrates suffered, and which his predecessors Anaxagoras and Archelaus had wisdom enough to entertain but dared not avow, was openly proclaimed in the licentious theatre, and applauded by the multitude. But there is

some appearance of plausibility in the apology for that inconsistency.

In the theatre, impiety excited strong feeling, and the people's gratitude to the poet who could so faithfully amuse them would easily find apology for more glaring impropriety. But the philosopher was the teacher of youth, who should do away with every improper impression, and might not be allowed to infringe upon the faith they had been accustomed to venerate. Besides, they came to the lectures of the sage with dispassionate minds, and there was no purpose of warm feeling to be answered which might pardon the introduction of what they termed profanity. We must confess that it is hard to check and change the free tide of an ancient religion. When old prejudices which man entertains of his Maker are fixed; when he is reasoning himself into a consent to the laws of God which govern him; when he has incorporated the names and attributes of those who know and make his destiny with all his views

of existence; — be this religion bad or good, be its tendency what it may, till he is convinced of its error he will repel with indignation the power that came to rend and shatter the whole constitution of his soul.

The memory of Socrates was vindicated from calumny by the subsequent sorrow of the Athenians, who endeavored to atone for their crime by honors splendid if unavailing. Lysippus executed the costly tribute of their respect, and the vengeance of the senate fell upon the accusers, in punishment adequate to their guilt.

Socrates led a sanctimonious life. He was abstemious, and his whole demeanor corresponded with the coarseness of his features and the deformity of his person. By harsh discipline he endeavored to subdue his corporeal wants so far as to make them merely subservient to the mental advantage, yet never carrying it to anything like that excess of Indian superstition which worships God by outraging nature. This unnatural expression of courage has been

called an assertion of the dignity of man. Human nature wants no such champions.

We must hasten to take our leave of the illustrious Grecian. As the head of the Ionic school, he did more to found true philosophy on its legitimate basis than any other master. When we consider how much this individual fulfilled of the great duty which every man owes to his fellowmen, — that of crowding into a little life the most extended benefit, and contributing the strength of his soul to the aggrandizement of the species, — we shall acknowledge that few men can cope with him. Lord Bacon, the foremost of those few, did not come up to his irreproachable character.

The Present State of Ethical Philosophy

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[A Bowdoin Prize Dissertation of 1821]

WHEN the present system of things began its being, and the eternal relations of matter were established, the constitution of moral science was yet to be founded. It began with the social human condition, — with man's first sense of duty to his Maker and to his fellow-man. It has remained in permanent eternal principles, designed to regulate the present life and to conduct the human race to their unseen and final destinies. Its development was later: with rude and unworthy beginnings, in which Advancement was long scarcely perceptible and always uncertain, and blessed with no charter of exemption from the difficulties of error. For a time it was extricating itself from the consequences of mistake, and improving its condition, sometimes, however, making a false step and plunging deeper into gulfs of absurdity and

pollution; but it has finally placed itself on respectable ground in the circle of human knowledge.

It were a bold and useless enquiry, and leading back beyond the limits of human information, certainly claiming the apology of interest and importance, to ask what surpassing mind conceives the germ of moral science, or how it was communicated from heaven to earth. It was the beautiful and eternal offspring of other worlds, and conferred on this by interposition which no discoveries might anticipate.

We shall briefly sketch the history of ethical philosophy, and notice some prominent distinctions which separate ancient from modern ethics, before we proceed to consider the present state of the science.

We find irregular and casual hints of moral science thrown out by the most distinguished ancient Greek poets, descending, as is supposed, remotely from primeval revelation. We know of none, however, among the first schools of Grecian philosophy, who set himself apart for

the sublime purpose of gathering up the relations which bind man to the universe about him. Ethics were not thus early separated from the immature, misunderstood sciences of logic and metaphysics. The world was not old enough to have accurately parcelled and distributed her science into professions. The amassed stores of experience were not then overflowing her garners, as now, when ages of industry have elapsed to define and multiply the offices of her stewards.

Believing, as the philosophical ancients appear to have done, that the world as they found it has forever subsisted, and should continue to subsist, and that an inscrutable Fate overruled their destinies, who might make them, at pleasure, demigods or nonentities after death, they had but scanty encouragement for any grand and holy system which the ardor of virtue might induce them to form. Enthusiasm was chilled by the awful, unrevealing silence which prevailed over nature, and the sanctions which it supplied were inadequate to the support of a great religious faith.

Some, astonished at the lustre and enchantment with which this visible world was illumined and renewed, imagined the possibility of a more intimate connection between man and nature, and hence arose the mysteries of Eleusis, and the doctrine of natural magic. "The religion of Egypt," says Madame de Staël, "the system of emanations of the Hindoo, the Persian adoration of the elements, are vestiges of some curious attraction which united man to the universe." More fortunate is our condition; we recognize, with scientific delight, these attractions; they are material, still they are the agency of Deity, and we value them as subservient to the great relations we seek and pant after, in moral affinities and intellectual attractions, from his moral influence. But the high and adventurous ends which these interpreters proposed to themselves were unanswered and afterwards perverted in corrupt times.

Others among the ancients were fain to believe the voice of long descended tradition, and awaited the return of the departed gods with

the golden age of ample dispensations, and piously congratulated themselves on the security of human condition under the protection of Providence. Others threw themselves headlong on the comfortless creed of the administration of chance, and scoffed at the hopes and terrors of all, as distempered dreams.

To this frail and fleeting order of beings, persecuted by the same natural obstructions to possible aggrandizement, the progress of ages has unfolded, and immediate revelation sanctioned, a system of morality so complete and divine, and its promises attended with presentiments so rich of glory hereafter, as to exalt and assimilate the species to the boldest forms of ideal excellence.

We date the reduction of ethics to anything like a separate system from the time of Socrates.

"Socrates videtur, primus ab occultis rebus et a natura ipsa involutis, in quibus ante eum philosophi occupati fuerunt, philosophiam avocavisse et ad communem vitam adduxisse."*

* Cic. Academ. Quaestiones.

Others before him had been ambitious of dictating laws for the government of kings and empires, or had locked up their results and conclusions in costly manuscripts, so that their influence upon the public was remote and insignificant. But this patriotic philosopher extended his wisdom to the body of the people in the first city of the world, and communicated to his disciples, not a hieroglyphical scripture to amuse the learned and awe the ignorant, but practical rules of life, adapted immediately to their condition and character, and little infected by the dogmas of the age. To the inquisitive he unfolded his system, and the laws and dependencies of morals. The grandeur of his views regarding the Deity far outwent those of his contemporaries, whose malice exposed him to opprobrium as a blasphemer. There is an important circumstance attached to Socrates, which should not be forgotten in ethical history, — that from him is derived the modern custom of grounding virtue on a single principle.

In treating of things which are *just*, by which

he meant *virtuous*, he declares all things to be just which are agreeable to the laws. Modern improvement acknowledges this to be a flimsy and fallacious criterion, which must necessarily vary under every different government, and which sufficiently indicates the then imperfect state of morals.

In the beginning of the seventeenth century, when Bacon's "Inductive Philosophy" triumphed over Aristotle, and the authority of the Grecian sage began to decline, multitudes united to accelerate his fall. The indignation of the zealots against his errors went beyond bounds, and proceeded to abolish his empire in those departments where it deserved to remain entire. Such violent zeal will probably create a reaction at some future period. The ethics of Aristotle have been little read, and serve only to astonish the occasional student with the comprehension of remark and the advancement of knowledge which they contain.

Aristotle pursues different views of morals from the moderns, and exhibits unexpected

trains of ideas, unconnected, indeed, by philosophical association; he occupies himself long and tediously in ascertaining definitions and in drawing the boundary lines of moral and mathematical philosophy, and thus manifests the infancy of the science, but discovers an intellect which was acute to devise and vast to comprehend,—an intellect which belonged to that unequalled series commencing with Socrates and Plato,—alone, among the sons of Adam, qualified to institute and methodize the science of morality.

After the ages of Grecian refinement, during which all the sciences burst into premature perfection, the Stoics exhibited rational and correct views of ethics. Zeno, and, long after him, his illustrious disciples, Epictetus, Arrian, and M. Antoninus, maintained the doctrine of a supreme Intelligence, of his universal providence, and of the obligation we are under to conform to his will and acquiesce in his decisions as necessarily right and good.

Cicero, though the ornament and herald of

philosophy in his age, did little for the advancement of its principles. Cicero admired an elegant philosophy. What was uncouth or profound he polished and simplified; for no man on earth ever pictured to himself such high classical and ethereal beauty, for the worship of imagination, as this distinguished Roman. Cicero was an eclectic philosopher; he entered the schools free from the sourness of pedantry which the pride of philosophy was to pardon and hallow. His genius led him to explore theories and systems with a sole view to delight, — to seek something to employ his insatiable imagination. His usefulness to moral science is the same in kind, though superior in degree, to that of modern essayists; his elegant effusions inspired a delight to investigate the topics of which they treated, — a desire which twenty centuries have not abated in the breast of liberal scholars.

With Seneca and Marcus Antoninus closes the line of ancient moralists, and with them the chief praise of human ingenuity and wisdom.

Unassisted philosophy never made such vast proficiency as at the time elapsing between Socrates and Antoninus. After this time the Christian religion comes in, supplying the defects and correcting the errors of morality, and establishing on the whole a grander system; but human ingenuity alone never soared so high as during the epoch we have marked.

From these philosophers, ethics were delivered down to the Christian fathers with all the new motives and sanctions opened by revelation. With all their parade of schools and disputations, the fathers did little to settle the foundations of morals. They wrote much about them, and collected the crude materials for others to analyze. They endeavored to show a contrariety in the laws of reason and revelation, and to substitute their expositions of the one for the plain dictates of the other. But the obscurity of the monastic cell, and the narrow views which were entailed upon each succession of the Roman Priesthood, were unfavorable to grand apprehensions of moral science. Some

of them were sufficiently familiar with Greek and Roman philosophy to take up the subject on proper grounds, but it was beyond the force of minds perverted by bigotry to continue as it had been begun.

The history of this hierarchy must always remain a phenomenon in the annals of the world. The commissioned apostles of peace and religion were seen arming the nations of Europe to a more obstinate and pernicious contest than had ever been known; and pursued with fatal hostility, with seven successions of bloodshed and horror, till its dye was doubled on the crimson cross. Not content with this, the ambitious popes were embroiled in perpetual disputes with their crowned subjects, and from every new contest the consecrated robber reaped some new acquisition to enrich the domain of the church.

In the theory of this ecclesiastical government, a different and graver character should naturally have been expected from the vicar of Christ. From the nature of the institution,

great results in intellectual science might reasonably be expected from the peaceful and educated clergy. Neither domestic relations nor labors to obtain a livelihood interfered to deter them from these pursuits, and we can hardly ascribe their failure to want of motive. The difficulty seems to have been lodged in the very spirit which pervaded and characterized the whole church, that of choosing darkness rather than light, — a perverse obstinacy of ignorance. To exhibit a system of morals, entire and in all its parts, requires a powerful faculty of generalization, which is nourished only where opinion is free and knowledge is valued; it requires, also, an accurate discrimination, accustomed to oppose subtlety and sophistry with ambidexter ingenuity, and a complete emancipation from bigotry, the besetting sin of the Roman church. With the torch of revelation in their hands, we find the Christian fathers inculcating the necessity of silly and degrading penances, the offering of whim or delirium, or bidding the transgressor repair to the Holy Land, in order to propitiate

the favor of the Deity. The Hindoo had gone far beyond them in his moral estimates. "If thou be not," says the lawgiver Menu, "at variance, by speaking falsely, with Yama, the subduer of all, with Vaivaswata, the punisher, with that great divinity who dwells in the breast, go not on a pilgrimage to the river Ganga, nor to the plains of Curu, for thou hast no need of expiation."

By the rapid advancement of the collateral philosophy of the mind by the spring imparted by Bacon and Descartes, ethical speculations were matured and improved. It was useless to disclose defects in the culture of the moral powers till the knowledge of the mental operations taught how they should be amended and regulated.

With Lord Bacon our remarks have less connection than with his less illustrious contemporaries, for in contemplating the science of morals we have only to speak of the classifiers and theorists who have analyzed, not the sages who have recommended and applied it. A sketch

of the science has no more concern with the beautiful sentiments it contains or occasions, than the nature of the soil with the different owners through which its title had passed.

An important controversy which has been much agitated among modern philosophers, — whether benevolence or selfishness be the ground of action, — arose chiefly from the malevolent spirit of Mr. Hobbes, whose shrewd speculations discovered to society that all their relations were artificial and grotesque; and that nature, which they had ignorantly judged to be so sublime and aspiring, would lead them to the character and circumstances of bears and tigers.

This opinion that nature tends to savageness and stupidity is not true. For the impulse to exertion, which urges all our faculties to their highest possible degree, is very powerful and prompts men to social intercourse, where alone they have their widest range. We delight in every exertion of active moral power, and exclaim against every retrograde step, and against sloth, the antagonist vice, as the brother of ig-

norance. Few men, probably, feel any inclination to perform the experiment of weakening the magnet; all prefer to see its power accumulating. The system of fanatic philosophy which in the course of time was the result of these speculations of Mr. Hobbes, and the accursed fruits of whose prevalence were abundantly reaped in France, sweeps away all the duties which we owe to others; this would elevate the ostrich to a higher rank in the scale of merit and wisdom than the man, old and honorable, whose parental affection dictates actions of wise and profound calculation.

Dr. Cudworth attacked the system of Hobbes, in his "Immutable Morality," with ability and success, and modern opinion has concurred in his boldest positions. The fine remarks of the eloquent Burke may be extended to moral nature: "Nature is never more truly herself than in her grandest forms; the Apollo of Belvedere is as much in nature as any figure from the pencil of Rembrandt, or any clown in the rustic revels of Teniers." After Cudworth we must mention

Dr. Clark, Dr. Price, and Bishop Butler; and in naming Reid, Paley, Smith, Stewart, we complete the list of modern moralists.

After any review of the history of the science the question becomes important, In what respects does its ancient and modern history differ? The truths of morality must in all ages be the same; the praise of its teachers consists in the ability manifested in their development. A satisfactory development of these truths in morals is far more difficult than in other sciences, for the tenure is exceedingly delicate by which faculties imperfect as ours can long retain such objects in steady view; and it is a sagacious observation, somewhere made in the *Edinburgh Review*, that our feelings are never in their natural state when, by a forced revocation of them, we can attentively study their aspects. Its fundamental principles are taught by the moral sense, and no advancement of time or knowledge can improve them.

It is otherwise in the sciences which detect and measure the elements of matter; there,

great advancements may hereafter be made, and what are now regarded as profound and ultimate discoveries may at a distant period be looked upon as superficial and elementary speculations; many, perhaps, of the golden promises of alchemy may be realized, for we have not derived from nature any ultimate acquaintance with the constitution of the external world. But in morals, what is known now of the good and evil propensities of the heart, and of the modes of correcting and regulating them, was known two thousand years ago to every discerning and contemplative man, and Druid speculated with Druid much in the manner that a modern philosopher, with all his imagined immensity of improvement, converses with his friend on the ordinary topics of morality. This is abundantly proved by the circumstance which almost invariably attends promulgation of a philosophic theory, — that authors start up to prove its antiquity, and that it is the identical theory which Pythagoras, Plato, or Epicurus propounded before. Pythagoras is supposed to have

borrowed from the Druids his imperfect moral system.

We shall enumerate the chief points of distinction in modern ethics. The most which has been done is the tracing with great precision the boundary lines of the systems in order to adapt them, more and more accurately, to the known relations of truth.

The moderns have made their ethical writings of a more practical character than the sages of antiquity. It is common to accuse them of having written on such subjects as admitted of much display, to have paid more regard to the author than to the reader. The ancients balanced the comparative excellence of two virtues or the badness of two vices; they determined the question whether solitude or society were the better condition for virtue. The moderns have substituted inquiries of deep interest for those of only speculative importance. We would ask, in passing, what discussion of Aristotle or Socrates can compare, in this respect, with the train of reasoning by which Dr. Price arrives at the con-

clusion that every wrong act is a step to all that is tremendous in the universe.

Unlike the arts, science becomes simpler as it proceeds. The old enumeration of the elements has been subjected to scientific analysis until their number has been largely multiplied, and we are perhaps still far removed from the simplicity of nature. So in morals, the first speculators were propounders of theories which they could not explain, perplexing mankind and themselves with abstruse, ill-digested systems. As it progressed, light and simplicity began to be introduced into moral philosophy, but it was always a study which the indolent and mere man of taste abhorred. The moderns have struck nearer the root; they have brought in this simplification by laying down maxims in morals and proposing to introduce demonstrations from mathematical analogy.

In the modern systems of ethical philosophy the duties whose performance constitutes virtue are ranged under three classes; viz., those whose regard we owe to the Deity, those which we owe

to others, and those which regard ourselves. Morality founds these duties on the will of the Creator as expressed in the constitution of the world, and in revelation. In ascertaining the will of God it does not always proceed on the principle that the greatest possible happiness is intended, for that this is true, we cannot know; it is judged safer to reason from *adaptation* and *analogy*. The object of these reasonings is to confirm the decision of the moral faculty, which is recognized as an original principle of our nature, — an intuition by which we directly determine the merit or demerit of an action. In these views man is regarded as a free agent, at least to all the purposes of which we have any conception, possessed of appetites, desires, and affections which he is to regulate and control. The hope opened to his aspirations is a future life of retribution to which all the energies of rational creation look forward, promised by revelation and confirmed by adaptation and analogy.

Next to these, philosophy explains the rights of man, as, paternal rights, the rights of person

and property, implying the right of self-defence. These are better understood now than formerly. Prior to the precise defining of the limits of obligation and right, the paternal authority was extended by the laws of Rome over the life as well as fortunes of the son, until the father should voluntarily resign it. This dangerous paternal prerogative could not be tolerated at the present time in civilized nations. The wisdom of experience has determined that such an institution operates to the mischief of both; by investing the father with the power it tempts him to become a tyrant, and the son of a domestic tyrant was rarely virtuous himself. There are peculiar traits in morals of remarkable force, which it is necessary to name.

Moral philosophy recognizes a leveling principle which makes void the distinctions of intellect and the pride of erudition. It is fit that such a rule should be found in the world, else the universe would present an aristocracy odious to God and man, where the splendid but profaned gifts of genius would entitle the possessor

to the thrones of angels; where then should we look for humble energies, though perhaps entirely devoted to the cause of virtue. In the eye of Deity the prostitution of genius annuls the praise of its acquisitions, and the improver of one talent shall be amply repaid for its proper merit. It is intended that genius should be counterbalanced by worth, and this prevails so far that perhaps in another state the scale which now measures greatness may be entirely reversed.

There is another distinguishing feature in morals which deserves notice, and which bears some analogy to the last,—that a series of humble efforts is more meritorious than solitary miracles of virtue. The former are unpretending and unnoticed, opposing more obstacles to pursuit with less outside honor to allure imitation; the latter excite applause, and as their occasions necessarily occur seldom, are of less utility to the general welfare. For example, the patience of an obscure individual who endures for years the peevishness or fretful disdain of another, still preserving his own susceptibility,

and at the last feels every emotion of benevolence for the offender, is a nobler martyrdom than Regulus or Curtius underwent. Or supposing the case that the private life of Curtius exhibited the character we have described, it was a greater merit thus to suffer than to perform his renowned sacrifice. For the human mind is so constituted as to expand on extraordinary calls for sentiment and strong feeling to meet the occasion with adequate effort; and this spring will alone prompt a susceptible man to great sacrifices, even without fixed principles of virtue. Hence all the inducements which this excitement and the love of fame present subtract from the moral merit; and let any man ask himself in moments of high excitement, whether, had he been placed in parallel circumstances with the Roman, could he have hesitated a moment to plunge into the yawning abyss.

We have sketched the leading characteristics of ethical science as it is represented by modern teachers, — by Reid, Paley, Stewart. But there have been always connected with this science

disputes on the nature of happiness and of virtue. The ancient sectarians, in their distinctive moral tenets, only embodied the ideas which every man conversant with ethics entertains of happiness in different moods of mind. When his contemplations are religiously pure, he acknowledges the truth of Socrates and the Stoics, who placed felicity in virtue; when his mind is relaxed and his heart and taste excited, he imagines the chief good to reside, as the Cyrenaics supposed, in pleasure, or, with the Epicureans, in tranquillity of mind; and when he recollects these vacillations of opinion, he unites with the doubting Pyrrho to found happiness on an absolute exemption from scruples and the confession that there is no constant nature of good and evil. The most ingenious theory which has been proposed to reconcile these futile speculations on this theme is Mr. Hume's, who, in developing his scheme of excitability and excitement, did not attempt to prove the existence of any single splendid quality attainable by the few alone, but to establish a universal equi-

librium of capacity for enjoyment and pain. Old systems indicated some one external quality or affection of the mind as happiness; the present plan discovered it in the condition of mind, without regard to the particular objects of contemplation. Whatever may have been the views which dictated this theory, it certainly discovers great philosophical sagacity.

In the ardor of reducing all science to ultimate principles, from Socrates to Paley, *virtue* has shared largely in these attempts of philosophers. One maintained a balance among the affections; another, action according to the fitness of things. Wollaston urges the *truth*, and Goodwin the *justice* of things. Dr. Paley attempted to reconcile all on the principle of expediency. All understand by it the same thing, — a conformity to the law of conscience. It is only a dispute about words.

Mr. Hume (whose acknowledgment of daily contradiction to his theory every one is prone to remember) has attempted to undermine the foundations of belief, and to represent the eter-

nal truths of morality as involved in the same gloomy uncertainty with which he would envelop all knowledge. Entrenching himself behind his system, which can find no relation between cause and effect, he wanders on till he has effaced memory, judgment, and, finally, our own consciousness; and the laws of morals become idle dreams and fantasies.

This outrage upon the feelings of human nature cannot be supported by any dexterous use of argument. If this only be fact, mankind will be content to be deceived; if the system of morals which we hold to be true be a dream, it is the dream of a god reposing in Elysium; and who would desire to be awaked from the sublime deception? To this pernicious ingenuity has been opposed the common-sense philosophy of which Dr. Reid is the chief champion, which aims at establishing a code of propositions as axioms which no rational being will dispute, and, reasoning from these, to refute the visionary schemes of Mr. Hume and Bishop Berkeley. These reasonings as yet want the neatness and

conclusiveness of a system, and have not been made with such complete success as to remove the terror which attached to the name of Hume.

It has lately become prevalent to speak slightingly of this great man, either lest the ignorant should suspect him to be an overmatch for the orthodox philosophers, or in order to retaliate upon infidelity that irresistible weapon, a *sneer*. Such a course of conduct is injudicious, for inquiry is not likely to sleep in such an age, on such a subject; and if there be formidable doubts to which no unanimous solution can be formed, it is more philosophical, as well as more manly, to ascribe to human short-sightedness its own necessary defects, for the end of all human inquiry is confessedly ignorance.

The only way to determine the perfection of the present state of ethics is by examining how far they fall short of the condition at which we may reasonably expect human improvement to arrive. After ages of separation from our present being we shall be more competent to adjust these estimates. Every man is liable to be mis-

led by his personal improvement, and an individual arrived at that period of life when every day discovers a new set of ideas is prone to mistake the rapid development of his own powers for an accession of light which has broken upon the age. In topics of this nature there is also danger lest minute details of some portions which have had peculiar interest for him intrude upon his notice so as to occupy a disproportionate part of the picture. We must content ourselves with making observations on the condition of society and its causes so far as they relate to ethics.

Much has been done in the higher ranks of modern society by English periodical essays. Ranked with the elegant classics of the age, they have penetrated where treatises professedly moral would never have come. This is combating vice in its high places with its own weapons. The most abominable evil becomes seductive by an unnatural union with elegance, and corrupt genius has accomplished immense mischief by insinuating that we abhor what we admire. It

is just that virtue should avail itself of the same advantage and embellish moral truth with intellectual beauty. Here there is no disgusting antipathy or repulsion to be overcome; they combine perfectly, and in their results we should expect from mankind the creation of demigods.

Very much has been claimed for *The Spectator* in rooting out, first, the lighter follies of fashion, and afterwards invading vice of a darker character, particularly gaming and duelling. From the facts adduced, it appears that the real good done to mankind has not been overrated, and the authors of the *Tatler*, *Spectator*, *Rambler*, and *Adventurer* deserve the praise which Socrates and which Cicero merit. They have diffused instruction and inspired a desire in those studious of elegant literature to inquire, by unfolding in pleasing forms the excellence of virtue and by taking advantage of that principle in our nature which induces us to enjoy, with satisfaction and delight, pictures of finished virtue. They have censured the turpitude of wit and recommended virtuous feeling so artfully that the

strains could not displease. "The good and evil of Eternity," said Johnson, "are too ponderous for the wings of wit," — but it may sustain its share of the burden and prepare the way for science to soar.

From these causes of the vast propagation of knowledge in the world is derived the chief advantage of modern ethics, — that they are everywhere disseminated. It is only from very extensive comedy in the departments of literature that the tone and character of prevalent conversation which belonged to any period can be faithfully transmitted. Hence if we institute a comparison between the ordinary colloquial intercourse of ancient Rome and Greece on the one part and modern civilized nations on the other, we are obliged to resort, in forming our ideas of them, to the influence of their political condition, and to the diffusion of knowledge which we know them to have enjoyed.

But judged in these respects, modern society will be found to outstrip the maturest progress of both these nations. In every family of ordinary

advantages in the middle ranks of life the great questions of morality are discussed with freedom and intelligence, introduced as matters of speculation but as having foundations of certainty like any other science. In the lowest orders of the people the occurrences of the day are debated, the prudence or folly of politicians and private conduct examined, and all with a reference to know the principles of ethical science. Anciently, such views were confined to small circles of philosophers. Out of the schools they were regarded as things of remote and partial interest, much as we regard the useless subtleties of the schoolmen. Now these discussions are connected with the domestic arrangements of every household and are associated with every recollection of his childhood which the man retains and acts upon afterwards. This diffusion of the knowledge accumulated upon these topics, although it does not multiply new terms of technical value nor unfold delicate discoveries to the subtle metaphysician, is yet the true and best interest of philosophy; for it marks the boundary line of

truth and speculation, it settles the foundations of the science to be in the opinions of men, and thus confers the only legitimate immortality upon its constitution and results.

The last view in which we propose to consider our subject is the influence of the present advanced acquaintance with ethics on political science. This influence is not subtle or difficult to be perceived, but is perfectly plain and obvious. After the decline of the Roman church the lower orders in Europe had no Indian Brahmin to tell them that in the eternal rounds of transmigration their souls could never rise above the jackal; and the license which the press immediately created tended directly to enlighten and emancipate them. Such books as Machiavel's "Prince," whether designed to favor them or not, could not fail to open their eyes to the bondage under which they groaned. When at length moral discussions, which before were strange and unintelligible to their ears, began to be understood and they comprehended the nature of property and government, things were in a train

of amendment, and popular investigation could not be averted. There could be little hope left to oppressive despotism after the peasant had learned that the professed object of the robed and reverenced legislator was to "repress all those actions which tend to produce more pain than pleasure, and to promote all those which tend to produce more pleasure than pain." The results of this progress have been distinctly manifested in the gradual demolition of the feudal system, by the rise of the commons in Europe; secondly, by the full development of the science of Representation; and lastly, by the rebellion of the people against the throne, everywhere manifested either in dangerous symptoms or in actual revolution. To the statesman this crisis becomes alarming; he surveys national embarrassments with regard to their immediate consequences, and that continent is crowded with politicians portending tremendous events about to ensue. But the moralist regards this commotion as the inevitable effect of the progress of knowledge which might have been foreseen almost from the invention of print-

ing, and which must proceed, with whatever disastrous effects the crisis is attended, to the calm and secure possession of equal rights and laws which it was intended to obtain.

We are prone to indulge ideas of the perfectibility of human nature, when we anticipate the condition of future ages, and attempt to form estimates of their moral greatness. In contemplating a science whose very object is to perfect the nature of man, imagination oversteps unconsciously the limit, to depict miraculous excellence which poetry promises and philosophy desires but dares not expect. The first true advance which is made must go on in the school in which Reid and Stewart have labored. Philosophers must agree in terms and discover their own ideas with regard to the moral sense, or, as others term it, the decisions of the understanding. They will perhaps form the proposed code of moral maxims and look no longer for many ultimate principles. It is not necessary to make a moral arithmetic, as Bentham has done, but it is necessary that they should persevere in accurate classifications; and

when at length the possessors of the science shall have agreed in their principles, the precepts of acknowledged right must find their way into the councils of nations.

The plague spot of slavery must be purged thoroughly out before any one will venture to predict any great consummation. The faith of treaties must be kept inviolate even to the partial suffering of millions, and the pandects which subsist between all the civilized nations — that sole memorial of human fellowship — must be religiously observed. Abolishing the thousand capricious policies which dictate the conduct of states, there must be substituted the one eternal policy of moral rectitude. The establishing of the American government we esteem as tending powerfully to these objects, — a government into which the unclean spirit of barbarous and unequal institutions has not entered, but which was formed in the very spirit of enlarged knowledge and liberal notions. Should these eras of perfection which imagination anticipates arrive, we must cease to speculate with any reference to the

progress of science; if science can sustain such an advancement, it must terminate here. Ethics are only the alphabet of the perfection of rational nature; it here becomes an elementary recollection, and useless any further.

Such is a sketch of the progress and present condition of morals, of its objects and characteristic features, and of its prospects. Every discussion of this science carries with it this recommendation, — that it is a new assertion of the highest human privileges; that, independently of the view which it opens, we only begin speculations which we shall continue in more exalted states of existence. The interest which belongs to other sciences is partial and short-lived; the arts and physical researches do not awaken the same enthusiasm in the young enquirer and in the man who lingers on the limits of life; but the old age of the moralist is the harvest of many studious years, when he is gathering in long-expected results and solutions, the fruit of much experience and much solitary thought; and as

human imperfections fade before him, his eye is fixed on richer acquisitions.

To become a fervent scholar in this science, it is only necessary to learn its objects and tendencies. Morality is constituted the rule by which the world must stand. The laws which govern society are only compends, more or less imperfect, of natural morality. The departure from this law is the decay of human glory. Formerly, moral corruption struck the blow at Assyrian, Grecian, and Roman magnificence, and is at this day sapping the stability of European monarchies. Amid the violent convulsions of the political world produced by this energetic principle of desolation, it is well to withdraw ourselves from so wretched a spectacle, to search out the sources in the passions of individuals. It is ennobling thus to place ourselves on an eminence from whence we survey at once the whole history of legislation and refer to our knowledge of ethical truth in judging of the good or bad spirit of laws. So in letters, if it is a

refined study to examine and compare the literature of different nations and follow the flight of different muses, it is more refined to discover the reasons why they give pleasure, to trace the moral influence which created them, and the reciprocal influence which they claimed on morals.

But its chief eulogy consists in its effect on the individual. It obliterates the impure lines which depravity, error, and example have written upon the mind, and having erased these first impressions, and abolished crime which is engendered by them, substitutes sentiments and precepts which promote the happiness of man, whose exercise generates pure and tranquil enjoyment, and which the Divine Being will justify and reward. Happiness is incompatible with consciousness of danger; the sense of insecurity poisons the passing delight with the constant apprehension of its loss; but nothing can alter the peace of mind which dwells, by a divine necessity, with unblemished virtue; it is perpetually advancing towards new relations of intellectual splendor and moral sublimity.

We are justified in preferring morals to every other science; for that science has more permanent interest than any other, which, outliving the substance on which other knowledge is founded, is to retain its relations to us when man is resolved into spirit. That which constitutes the health integrity of the universe should be known as far as that universe extends to the intelligences which imbibe and enjoy the benevolence of its Author.

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